

STAFF PHOTO/ROB ALARY

Former alcoholic and prescription drug-addict Don Slessor has been sober for 12 years. He now operates Solutions Counselling Consultants as a certified alcohol and drug counsellor.

Agency helps drunk drivers get back behind wheel ... sober

BY LISA QUEEN
Staff Writer

As the province continues to escalate its crackdown on drunk drivers, a Newmarket counselling service says it can offer a way for drivers who have lost their licences to get back on track.

But not without admitting they have a problem and undergoing an extensive counselling course.

Don Slessor is a former alcoholic and prescription drug-addict who now operates Solutions Counselling Consultants as a certified alcohol and drug counsellor. On June 11, he will have been sober 12 years.

The centre offers individual counselling, employee assistance programs, group sessions, workshops and life-skills programs.

One of the largest growing components of the business is operating courses for clients whose doctors have reported them to the Ministry of Transportation because they continue to abuse alcohol and drugs while holding a driver's licence.

"It's becoming an explosive issue," said Mr. Slessor, who added those drivers must complete an approved course such as his and prove through blood tests they haven't touched a drink for a year.

"It's because of societal pressures we don't want these people on the road. I support this 100 per cent. It's about borders of responsibility. I support 100 per cent keeping our roads safe. It's your privilege to drive, not your right."

Dr. Ed Yielding, the medical director of Renascent Treatment Centres in Toronto and Solutions Counselling's addictions consultant and medical advisor, said the College of Physicians and Surgeons is pushing doctors to report patients with addiction problems who hold drivers licences.

He supports the initiative, arguing losing their licence is often the only wake-up call to which problem drinkers will respond.

'It's your privilege to drive, not your right.'

"I think the Ministry of Transportation has taken a hard-nosed stand but I think it's appropriate," he said. "Look at the number of deaths on our highways. A high percentage have to do with alcohol. I believe a lot of people are still ignoring the rules of drinking driving."

Of the 20,896 motor vehicle collisions in Ontario that resulted in charges under the Criminal Code of Canada in 1999, 17,089 were alcohol related. Of the 1,374 fatal accidents in the province that same year, 173 involved the driver drinking.

Ministry spokesperson Bob Nichols said getting drunk drivers off the roads is an ongoing priority for the province.

"I would say it's not a renewed effort, it's continual," he said, adding drivers can also lose their licences if they are charged by police for blowing over the legal

limit or for impaired driving.

"We have some of the toughest drunk driving legislation on the continent here and we have for some time. We do all we can to combat this problem."

For example, in the 13 months that Ontario's Administrative Driver's Licence Suspension program has been in effect, there has been a 17-per-cent drop in the number of fatally injured drivers with blood-alcohol levels over the legal limit. The program requires anyone charged with driving with a blood alcohol level over 80 mg or refusing to give a breath sample immediately loses their licence for 90 days.

The Back on Track program, initiated in 1998, requires drivers to complete an assessment, undergo an education or treatment program and participate in an interview six months later before their licence is reinstated.

Early next year, Mr. Nichols said the province will set up a program that requires drivers with a reinstated licence to have an appliance installed in their ignition. They will have to blow into the equipment each time they get into the vehicle to prove they haven't been drinking before the car will start.

As important as it is for society to get drunk drivers off the road, Mr. Slessor said it is just as important to offer counselling to those ready to turn their lives around.

For more information about Solutions Counselling Consultants, call 1-905-830-0404.

Honeymoon over for bylaw violators

Region vows to get tough on businesses that buck no-smoking law

BY JEFF MITCHELL
Staff Writer

Yesterday marked the first anniversary of the implementation of phase two of York Region's tough anti-smoking bylaw, legislation that has generated anger and debate since its passage.

The grace period for restaurateurs, tavern keepers and other proprietors who've avoided prosecution under the law is over, according to York's regional health department.

While bylaw enforcement officers have been lenient in levying fines, the honeymoon is over, said department spokesperson Kim Clark.

"This first year, we've really tried to make it an educational process," Ms Clark said.

That means inspectors have been handing out notices for infractions such as improper signage and failure to prevent smoking in non-smoking areas, rather than tickets.

"Sometimes they'll (inspectors) go back two and three times, really trying to work with the proprietor," Ms Clark said.

But now that the grace period is over, fines will start coming with more frequency.

"As of June 1, we're not doing that (handing out notices of infractions rather than tickets) anymore," Ms Clark said.

That's not to say there haven't been tickets issued. Bylaw officers have been busy writing up bar and restaurant owners for infractions of the law. Numerous court dates have occurred or been set.

Some business establishments are openly flouting the law, which they say has carved away 20 per cent of their business, or more.

The section of the bylaw implemented a year ago makes it illegal to smoke in restaurants and restricts smoking to 25 per cent of the occupiable floor space in bars, bowling alleys, pool halls and other places where the public convenes.

In two years, smoking will be illegal outside of self-contained, ventilated designated smoking rooms.

The bylaw has been assailed constantly by business people, but they have met with a steely resolve by regional councillors not to sway from the letter of the law — with one notable exception.

Earlier this month, Markham representatives managed, after months of debate, to push through an amendment allowing smoking in 50 per cent of the occupiable space in bingo halls, the same space allowed in Peel Region and the City of Toronto.

Markham took up the fight on behalf of local charities, which raise funds through bingos. They complained bingo players, an overwhelming majority of whom smoke, were simply going to other jurisdictions where smoking rules are not as stringent and taking their money with them.

The amendment angered Vaughan Regional Councillor Joyce Frustaglio, chairperson of the regional health committee and a fierce anti-smoking crusader. She's warning other parties not expect more revisions to the law.

"The no smoking bylaw is first and foremost a public health measure to protect our residents from the harmful effects of second-hand tobacco smoke," Ms Frustaglio said.

PUBLIC ON SIDE

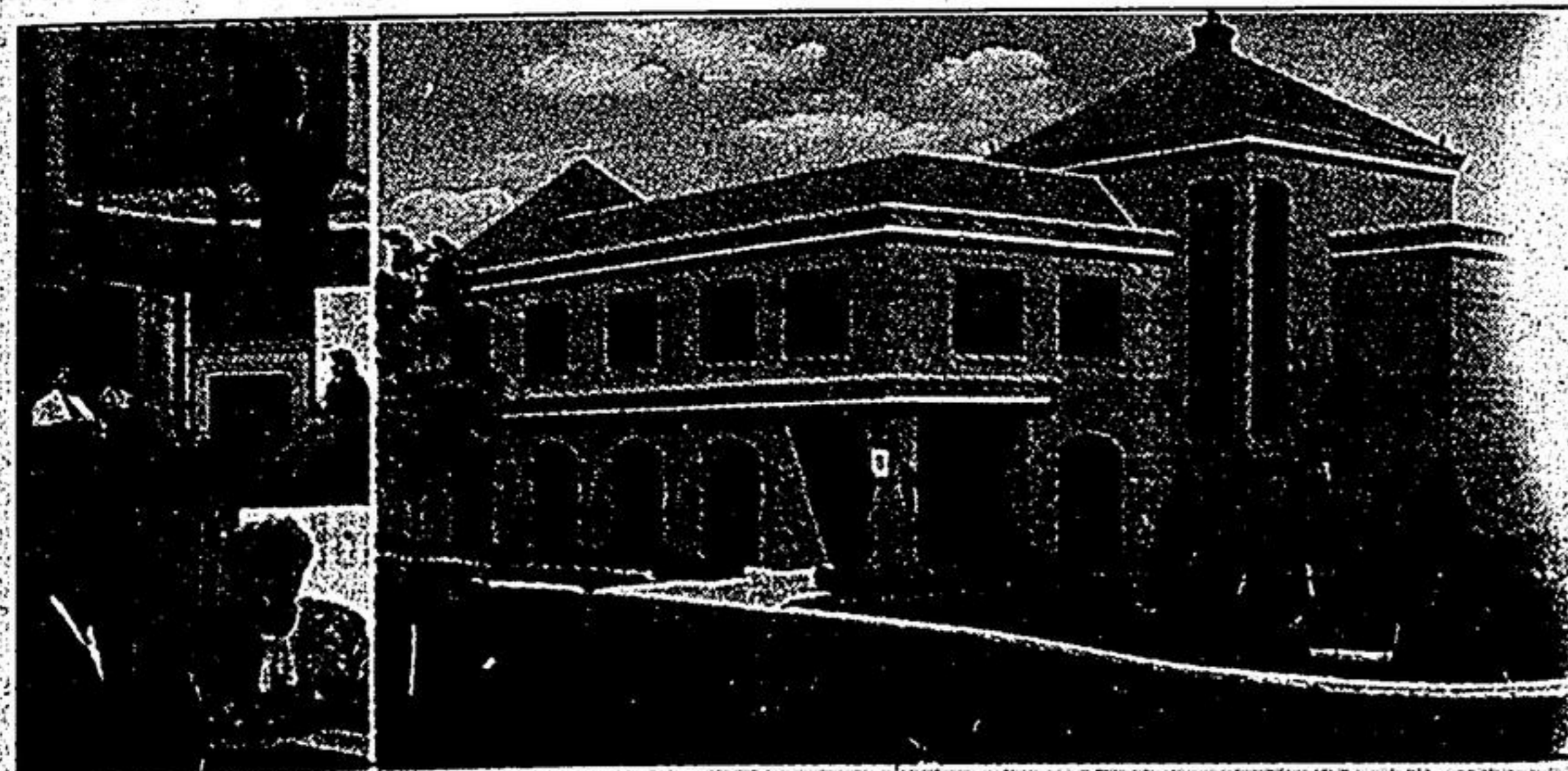
"The debate has recently strayed from its original purpose into discussions about rights and economics. We will continue to listen attentively to these discussions, but we must now refocus our efforts on the health issue of second hand smoke."

The region claims to have the public on its side. Recent Environics poll results released by the municipality show 82 per cent of respondents are in favour of smoke-free restaurants, while 72 per cent favour of smoke-free bars.

The resolve to the fight the law remains strong, particularly among bar and restaurant owners who claim their sector has been profoundly affected. They hope to mount a constitutional challenge to the bylaw, questioning the right of municipalities to pass laws governing smoking at all. They could find a powerful ally in the Pub and Bar Coalition of Ontario (PUBCO), which has already launched unsuccessful challenges of Ottawa's total ban on public smoking.

"If this (constitutional challenge) is what the membership wants, that's the way we'll go," said Barry McKay, a spokesperson for the group. "But we have to be pretty convinced about the possibility of winning."

Mr. McKay said he'd be content with a provincewide set of regulations that impose identical rules everywhere, creating the "level playing field" proprietors seek.



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8911 Woodbine Avenue
Markham, Ontario L3R 5G1
(3 blocks north of Hwy 7)
(905) 305-8508
E-mail: info@chapelridgefh.com
www.chapelridgefh.com
Toll Free: 1-877-889-8808

